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ABSTRACT

An exploration of Project Transition, an outgrowth of the University Without Walls program for adult learners, is presented. The development on nontraditional educational thinking is recounted from a personal standpoint, including the realization that return to education in mid-life often signaled a larger decision to reshape personal identity, and that this group needed a supportive re-entry experience in order to learn successfully. Early seminars are surveyed, and the evolvement of Project Transition is detailed. Topics of seminars developed include: The Psychology of Adulthood, Values in Adult Experience, Perspectives on the Future, and Learning as Adults. The rationale for course topics and seminar setting is examined. Four phases of life in a learning community are identified. The first is engagement, the phase in which participants in a group first become acquainted with each other, the setting, and the task. The second is shared leadership, the phase in which the group members begin to share responsibility for what happens in the group. The third phase is involvement, as members have developed knowledge of their roles and move ahead to the task of learning together. The final phase is disengagement, the realization that the life of the group is ending. A Project Transition student questionnaire and participation graphic are appended. (PHR)

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May 1978

ON BUILDING A LEARNING COMMUNITY OF ADULTS

I can remember a time when working with adults in groups was the farthest thing from my mind. The time was 1971, and I was entering into the adventure of nontraditional education, developing one of the first University Without Walls programs. The most striking feature of UWW was its individualization; students progressed at their own pace, in pursuit of their own goals, through individual learning contracts. That was a demanding process; the students struggled with the task of taking responsibility for the direction of their own education. But it also was a time of remarkable freedom. Anyone involved in higher education during the '60's remembers the profound dissatisfaction of those times. Required courses and traditional systems of thought were challenged and often abandoned. But alternative courses and systems of thought didn't fare much better. All of higher education was being tested and, usually, found wanting.

And so there was something very satisfying and liberating about working within a new system which centered educational growth and planning in the initiative of individuals. I once described the new roles of nontraditional higher education:

> "One way to consider the differences between this new role and the traditional role of "teacher" is to contrast "teaching" and "learning". "Teaching," from the vantage point of the student, is an extrinsic activity, something done to him. To be sure, the student may benefit from the process as he acquires useful knowledge and skills, And, he may find the activity stimulating if, for example, his teacher is an adept lecturer. But as student-to-be-taught he functions within a certain closure, subject to a process which emanates outside him.

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> "Learning", by contrast, emanates from within the student-as-learner. It is an activity which is energized and centered in a particular, growing individual. Learning thrives upon forces which infuse personal growth in general, such as curiosity and wonder and the wish to become free. It is, potentially, a lifelong process which keeps open and alive the fundamental growth-questions of childhood: Who am I? Who are you? and What is the world like?
>
> If one can appreciate this approach to human learning, it is possible to look at the role of the educator in new ways. To begin with, it seems that a "learning facilitator" (to use a cumbersome, but probably the best available phrase) is free of many of the "teacher's" encumbrances. When education is seen centered in a process of growth which the student shares, the learning-facilitator need no longer occupy center stage; like the learner, he can participate in and enjoy a process which embraces them both."

That was the tenor of nontraditional education for me.

In addition to educational philosophy, there was another important reason for individualizing higher education in the early 1970's. Most of the people who appeared to enroll in University Without Walls and similar "external degree" programs were adults in mid-life who knew what they wanted and what they needed to study. (The enrollment of older people was not entirely anticipated when the nontraditional programs were designed. But that's where the clientele emerged. Soon the median age of students in all twenty UWW programs was about 35, and we began to realize that we had unwittingly entered the field of "adult education.") And so it went for the first few years of nontraditional higher education in the early '70's.

Slowly, however, the pendulum began to swing away from solely individualized learning. It became apparent that new resources were needed to help students through the UWW process. They complained that in many ways their new freedom was a burden. It was hard to take so much responsibility in planning one's own education, and

it was hard to study alone. To suffer from procrastination, for example, was unpleasant in a classroom. Yet, there one might find another procrastinator or two and that might give comfort to a guilty conscience. But how terrible it was to procrastinate alone, with no one to blame but oneself! Similar problems could occur in relationships with academic advisors (the people I've called "learning facilitators" above). It wasn't always easy to stand up for oneself with an advisor, without the support of peers. And so these independent learners who had sought out UWW in order to do their own thing began to ask for new systems of support. Their message to us administrators was something like "Leave me alone, but don't leave me!"

There was another reason to begin paying attention to providing more support through groups. Adult learners were experiencing problems not only with their learning process, but also in their personal lives. Most of the students who made a decision to continue their education in mid-life did so in connection with some larger life transition. They were women breaking free from traditional domestic roles, men feeling stagnated in a dead-end occupation, persons preparing for a creative retirement, memebers of minority groups caught up in a wave of efforts to desegregate the society. In many ways, their decisions to resume an interrupted education was part of an effort to reshape personal identity.

A third area of need became increasingly apparent. Many adults who might have continued growing through UWW programs failed to apply. They were uncertain of their own abilities to adjust to and prosper in an academic environment. They needed a supportive "re-entry" experience

in order to learn successfully.

At about this time the first results of studies on adult psychological development became generally available. The writings of Roger Gould, Daniel Levinson, Gail Sheehy and others cast a whole new light on the middle years. Now achieving identity was seen not as a one-shot developmental task of young adulthood, but as a recurrent, lifelong process. It was okay now to redirect one's life at age 35, and there were new resources available to help one do it.

* * * *

My first attempt to develop new curriculum with and for adult learners was a seminar with about a dozen University Without Walls students at Chicago State University in the fall of 1976. The seminar was an outgrowth of some research and writing I'd done on adult learning and development through the Union For Experimenting Colleges and Universities (A New Look At Lifelong Learning, 1976. The Union Press). That work had been supported by two longtime friends and fellow UWW Program Directors, Ellie Greenberg and Walt Buchmann. Our interest in the material was more than academic and professional. Our own lives were going through transition, too, and we were in need of new insights no less than our students. Another important source of the seminar was our tradition in the UWW program at Chicago State of working collaboratively as a staff with our students. Students participated actively on our advisory committee, sharing responsibility for every significant decision about the program. We also participated together in occasional Saturday or weekend workshops in which we identified and organized

ourselves to resolve problems and needs as they arose in the program. We were a diverse group--diverse in age, race and ethnicity, occupation and level of income--but we were very close in many ways and we were accustomed to working through problems together.

The first seminar met two evenings a week in the library of University Disciples Church, on the south side of Chicago. Our average age was about forty, and the group was about two-thirds black, one-third white; the sex ratio was equal. During the semester we read and discussed Passages by Gail Sheehy and some other material on adult development. We did some exercises together such as sharing "lifelines" of our lives to date. My strongest memory of that group was its capacity to give support. Several of the members were experiencing severe job and marital conflicts. I myself had recently passed through the worst period of my adjustment following a difficult divorce. I also found myself embroiled in a series of conflicts with the administration at Chicago State. A lot of us were suffering the pains of growth. But through the process of studying, writing, and talking with one another we all were helped to stay afloat--and even, in some instances, to prosper. It was a good experience!

After moving to Denver the following semester, I worked with another group of students from the University Without Walls Program at Loretto Heights College. We went through the same process, meeting for several hours at the College on Saturday mornings. Again, the seminar was supportive and helpful. We seemed to have found a new resource for adult learners, and especially for adults in life transition. A "Project Transition" for such persons was in an initial pilot stage in the UWW

program. Ellie received information on a deadline for proposals to the Fund For Improvement of Postsecondary Education. The time was right to develop a full adult studies curriculum for Project Transition and to request supportive funding. And so we did.

Project Transition is now in its fifth semester. The Project has been a good laboratory for refining new content and procedures for seminars with adult learners. Four one-month seminars are held in the following subjects, in sequence: The Psychology of Adulthood, Values In Adult Experience, Perspectives on the Future, and Learning As Adults. The seminars meet about three hours a week, in groups of ten to twelve. Concurrent with the seminars, a career planning process is conducted one hour a week throughout the four-month period. Our objectives with the students are to help them explore and organize paths to career development while at the same time broadening and deepening awareness of themselves and their society through reading and discussion in the seminars. We are particularly concerned that our students develop sound and realistic educational plans, whether through University Without Walls or through some other program.

The 94 persons who have participated in Project Transition to date have come to us primarily through their interest in University Without Walls. Most of them had inquired about UWW but had not applied for admission. As a group they are diverse in age (from early 20's to late 50's), predominantly white, and mostly female.

Common readings in the seminars include Passages by Gail Sheehy, Future Shock by Alvin Toffler, Working by Studs Terkel, and my own manuscript Choosing Life.

* * * *

The content of our seminars was arrived at originally by hypothesis, based to some extent on our experiences, reading, and reflection. We knew that adult development literature was meaningful to many mid-life students, and that Gail Sheehy's book, Passages, was available as a very readable introduction to that literature. We also had developed an interesting collection of articles on adult learning and in that material saw a nucleus for the adult development seminar. The seminars on Valuing and on Futures similarly represented areas of longstanding interest. It seemed that studying values and future forecasting would enrich the process of career development.

At the same time that we were acting on assumptions about the needs of students, however, we developed several instruments to provide feedback on the curriculum as it evolved. A simple form distributed at the end of each seminar asks the students to comment, anonymously, on what they learned in the seminar, what they liked about it, and how the seminar might be improved. A more detailed evaluation is solicited at the end of each four-month Project Transition cycle, in a taped group interview. Each of the groups is asked to discuss the following, open-ended statements:

Being adult is...

What I most need to learn is...

My expectations of Project Transition were...

What I valued about the experience was...

What might be done differently is...

These tapes are transcribed, and then their content is analyzed for recurrent themes by a group of Project staff members and consultants. This analysis suggests areas of the curriculum which should be continued or modified.

Finally, a needs assessment form (see Appendix A) has been designed to acquire data on the interests of prospective students in Project Transition. We are especially interested in knowing about issues of concern to persons living in a particular community, or employed in a particular setting, which might serve as the subject for one or another of the Project Transition seminars.

This approach to developing curriculum reflects several assumptions about adult learning. We are, first of all, trying not to "teach", but to facilitate learning. We are just as anxious to develop studies with, rather than for, adult learners in seminar groups as we are with individual UWW students.

Second, we are trying to foster what Robert Butler calls "lifetime learning"--that is, learning about and throughout the human life cycle. (Why Survive? Being Old in American 1975. New York: Harper & Row) In lifetime learning we see a new and exciting approach to liberal studies, and a way through a dilemma common to adult external degree programs. For several years we have struggled with the problem of encouraging adults to learn in areas broader than their immediate vocations, and yet not prescribe for them subjects in which they have no intrinsic interest. By focussing our seminars in topics common to adult experience, it seems that adults can be helped to grow in the capacity to think more broadly and critically--to become more free intellectually--while still working with issues relevant to their lives. (One student last semester commented in the final, taped session: "For years all my friends and most of my acquaintances have been in the field of law enforcement. One of the great benefits of this group has been simply to open me up to new points of view." That, I think, is a classic instance

of intellectual liberation - "liberal education" in its best form.)

Finally, in our curriculum development we are trying to learn more about the timing and sequence of critical life events. That's the reason for our question, "What I need to learn most is..." in the research format of the final session. Who expresses a need to learn what, and when? It seems, for example, that learning about death and dying is an important need in our culture. But, to use Robert Havighurst's term, what is the "teachable moment" when it comes to death? And, similarly, with parenting. Is the best time to learn about dying or parenting when we are in the midst of encounters with dying or parenting, or long before we're existentially involved, or when the issue begins to appear imminent? One of the most important research subjects in lifetime learning would appear to be identifying which issues become "developmental tasks" (Havighurst's term for an issue which one is "required and ready to learn"), and when.

One of the issues our Project Transition students have consistently identified as a developmental task important to mid-life is valuing, i.e. identifying and assigning priority to important personal values, and learning to manage time and to make effective decisions on the basis of those values. In the midst of many roles, adults can lose track of their own priorities. Frequent references to this issues in the final tapes have corroborated our decision to include a seminar on valuing in the Project curriculum.

* * * *

In the process of facilitating Project Transition seminars, we have tried to pay attention to the same principles followed in developing content for the curriculum. We try to <u>facilitate learning</u> rather

than simply impart information, to support lifetime learning about and throughout the life cycle, and utilize those teachable moments when adults are likely to find themselves ready to address particular developmental tasks.

The setting in which we attempt to do all this is a small group seminar. I have found two definitions from a forthcoming taxonomy in adult learning useful in understanding the distinctive qualities of a seminar. (The publication is A Handbook of Standard Terminology for Describing Adult Learning Opportunities, by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems: Boulder, Colorado.) The Handbook, under "Group Methods", defines:

> "Classroom" as "Those methods which utilize a sequence of learning experiences arranged in a systematic order of predetermined duration, generally structured around a limited segment of a particular body of knowledge. The teacher/agent is charged specifically with the general direction, organization and control of the learning experience..." and
>
> "Seminar" as "Those methods in which the responsibility for planning and conducting is shared by the group members and the teacher/agent(s) or in which the group applies prior knowledge in addressing a problem or issue..." (emphasis added)

The two definitions highlight the differences between two very dissimilar learning settings. Most of us think of education in the former category, as a classroom experience. Most of our life as students has been spent in classrooms. And, since we all have a tendency to teach as were taught, most of us in nigher education have begun our careers as traditional classroom teachers. To be sure, some people have found a legitimate and comfortable place for themselves in that role. There is some material which is best taught and learned in a classroom. But often, in talking with colleagues,

I have been impressed by the extent to which their peak experiences in education have occurred in a seminar setting. Sometimes the setting just happened: enrollment for a class was exceptionally small, or the students were unusually well prepared. For whatever reason, the seminar experience generally turns out to be very rewarding. The educator is able to relax in the seminar, to reveal more of himself than usual, to collaborate with students in exploring answers to important questions. Seminars can offer room for growth in a spirit similar to Henri Nouwen's notion of "hospitality."

> "We cannot change the world by a new plan, project, or idea. We cannot even change other people by our convictions, stories, advice and proposals, but we can offer a space where people are encouraged to disarm themselves, to lay aside their occupations and preoccupations and to listen with attention and care to the voices speaking in their own center." (Henri Nouwen, Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life 1975. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, p. 54)

Sometimes we can anticipate when and where the shared-inquiry process of learning in seminars is likely to occur. And so we learn to negotiate for fewer lower division, required, introductory courses and for more upper division courses in which students come with some knowledge of our field and come by choice. We have learned that the two settings are likely to feel very different. What most of us learn more slowly is how to create the environment of a seminar, how to facilitate a community of learners. I still am learning how to do this, but in learning I've arrived at some insights which seem to be worth sharing.

The life of a learning community includes, I think, four somewhat distinct phases. I shall call these phases: engagement, sharing leadership, involvement, and disengagement. They are to be found in

the history of any group in which people are significantly involved. By paying attention to all phases of the process, and to one's own role at each point, it is possible for an educator to help create a climate in which persons can grow as they learn together. It is possible to help facilitate a learning community.

Engagement is that phase (usually encompassing the first few meetings) in which the participants in a group are first getting acquainted with one another, the setting in which they will meet, and with their task. This is a time when many people may feel strange, and most of us experience some pangs of anxiety. To some extent, the discomfort of this period simply must be lived through, but there are, I think, some ways in which a leader can facilitate working through the process. I try to avoid two kinds of behavior. I don't structure the experience for the students by dominating our discussions. Nor do I sit back and say nothing, leaving the students to flounder in a new situation. What I try to do is to help them get to know one another and to model behavior I think will help the group.

Typically on the first night we meet I ask the students to participate in an experiential exercise that has relevance to the material we'll study. (In the case of our adult psychology seminar, for example, I'll ask them to draw a lifeline representing their life to date, to pair with someone in the group they don't know, and to spend equal time sharing whatever they wish to about the life history they've represented in the exercise.) Exercises such as this one serve at least two functions. They can help individuals to relate theoretical constructs, such as "the nurturer who defers achieving" (Sheehy), to

their own experience. And, they help to build a cohesive group. It is important to provide a good measure of psychic space with the exercises. Persons should feel permission to gauge how much experience they share, and how. For example, in a sequel to the lifeline exercise, everyone is asked to write out a eulogy which they hope might describe their lives at the end. Then, with someone else reading the eulogy, they are asked to role play the response of a significant parent to the life described. That exercise can bring into sharp relief some important concerns and conflicts about achievement. It's essential, however, to provide a less demanding alternative way to participate, such as simply describing the probable reaction of the parent. Then people can to some extent regulate the intensity of their involvement. And, of course, it's important that leaders participate in the exercises themselves.

When I introduce theoretical material in the early sessions, I always do so in the context of a group decision. I ask people to take turns, going around in a circle, suggesting topics from our reading for discussion. If I wish to present some material, I indicate that I'd like to do that and then, when I've finished, suggest a general discussion or something else we might do. I also usually take some opportunity to share experiences from my personal life, demonstrating a kind of behavior which others might wish to follow. And I may comment on behavior in the group--on how the group feels to me, or on particular behavior which seems helpful or unhelpful to the building of the group. An important mode of behavior for me is sitting comfortably in silence. I try to support that as an option for the group.

The purpose of my participation at this point is to model some kinds of behavior which I feel might benefit the group. Phil Anderson has outlined some twelve options for participation available to a

person in a group: thinking, feeling, or acting about subject matter, about others, about oneself, or within the immediate encounter (see Appendix B). Phil has an interesting way of dividing up the pie. There are surely other ways as well. However we slice it, the important principles to bear in mind, I think, are that there are many ways of being in a group, and that a leader can help a group to develop by modelling some of these ways in his or her own behavior.

Sharing Leadership. This phase of the process often begins on a negative note, with some expression of dissatisfaction with the way things are going. Sometimes a discussion falls flat. Sometimes people decide they want to take more time to get to know one another, or whatever. In any case, after several weeks of meeting, someone usually expresses a desire to do something different in the group. This is a critical time in the group process. I try very hard at this point not to react by defending what has happened in the group or by fixing whatever is objected to. Instead, I encourage the group to begin to take more responsibility for what we do. Perhaps we'll spend more time in small group discussion. Perhaps I'll present more material. Perhaps we'll take a whole meeting to work through some problem in our communication or to share more information about ourselves. In any case, I try to participate in my own demise as the exclusive leader and to encourage others in the group to share responsibility for deciding what we'll do, and how we'll go about it. (Of course, I don't surrender leadership to someone I think may want to dictate to the group or in other ways impede it. If that begins to happen, I talk about my objections to that particular behavior and continue to try to model some alternatives.) In almost every case, moving to a position of shared leadership is a

positive and very meaningful stage of the process. And, in almost every instance, it's also the most difficult stage for a leader to let happen.

Involvement in the life of the group and in its task follows next. Having beome involved in the group and having worked out a provisional definition of each person's role in it, the group usually moves ahead with the task of learning together. This is a stage in the process when I usually find myself most relaxed and able to enjoy being a member of the group. Sometimes issues apparently resolved earlier will surface again, and we'll work again at some aspect of our task and our roles. Sometimes I'll feel a need to modify the process some way--perhaps by lecturing more! If so, I share whatever concern or need I feel and negotiate with the group just as would any other member.

If the process of sharing leadership has evolved well, this period is very stimulating intellectually. People bring in articles to share, introduce others to career resources, and generally contribute to a lively atmosphere.

Disengagement is the final stage of the process. I prefer that word to "termination" because the ending of a group really isn't so final. At some point, people begin to realize that the group will not go on forever, that it will have an end. And so the process of disengaging from the group begins. Here, again, it's helpful for the leader to model some approaches to this phase in the process. As soon as people begin to react to the approaching end of our meetings--whether by talking about it, missing sessions, or in other ways--I usually will talk about the end of the group and may share some of my feelings about what we've done together. We may use part of a session to talk about ending and where we are as individuals. Sometimes people want to share

names and phone numbers. Much of the process of working through the end of Project Transition groups takes place at our final, taped sessions. Sometimes we bring wine and food and have a celebration as we tape the last session. Sometimes we adjourn to the Longshot Lounge, down the hill from the College. But always, in some way, a group will note that it is ending, take stock of what it has and has not accomplished, and will celebrate the life its lived. In that phase, as in all the others, a group of adult learners is impressively similar to any other human community.

* * * *

Working with adult learners in groups offers an alternative to the isolation of individualized learning. It is important, though, to maintain a position of working with and not for the adults--of keeping adult learning "adult". This paper has offered one set of approaches to this task through the development of adult learning curriculum and the facilitating of a community of learners.

Appendix A

LORETTO HEIGHTS COLLEGE
UWW/PROJECT TRANSITION

The following questions are intended to gain information about your educational and career interests. Please read all the questions carefully and write down responses on the attached sheets.

1. What are two or three unique characteristics of your present responsibilities—in your job and/or in other important areas of your life?

2. What is the biggest problem you are experiencing?

3. What things about a job or vocation are most important to you? Which of these are present in your current job?

4. What are the important requirements of the job or vocation you'd most like to have?

5. What do you need to learn or change to be eligible for that job?

The following topics are issues which other adults have identified as important in their lives. These are the kinds of issues which can be included in Project Transition seminars. Please circle the topics which are important to you.

--becoming/feeling more competent

--establishing clear priorities

--experiencing freedom to be myself

--understanding and accepting the process of aging

--other

_____

_____

It is not necessary to sign your name to this form. But we would like to have the following information:

Age:_____ Sex:_____

Level of Education:

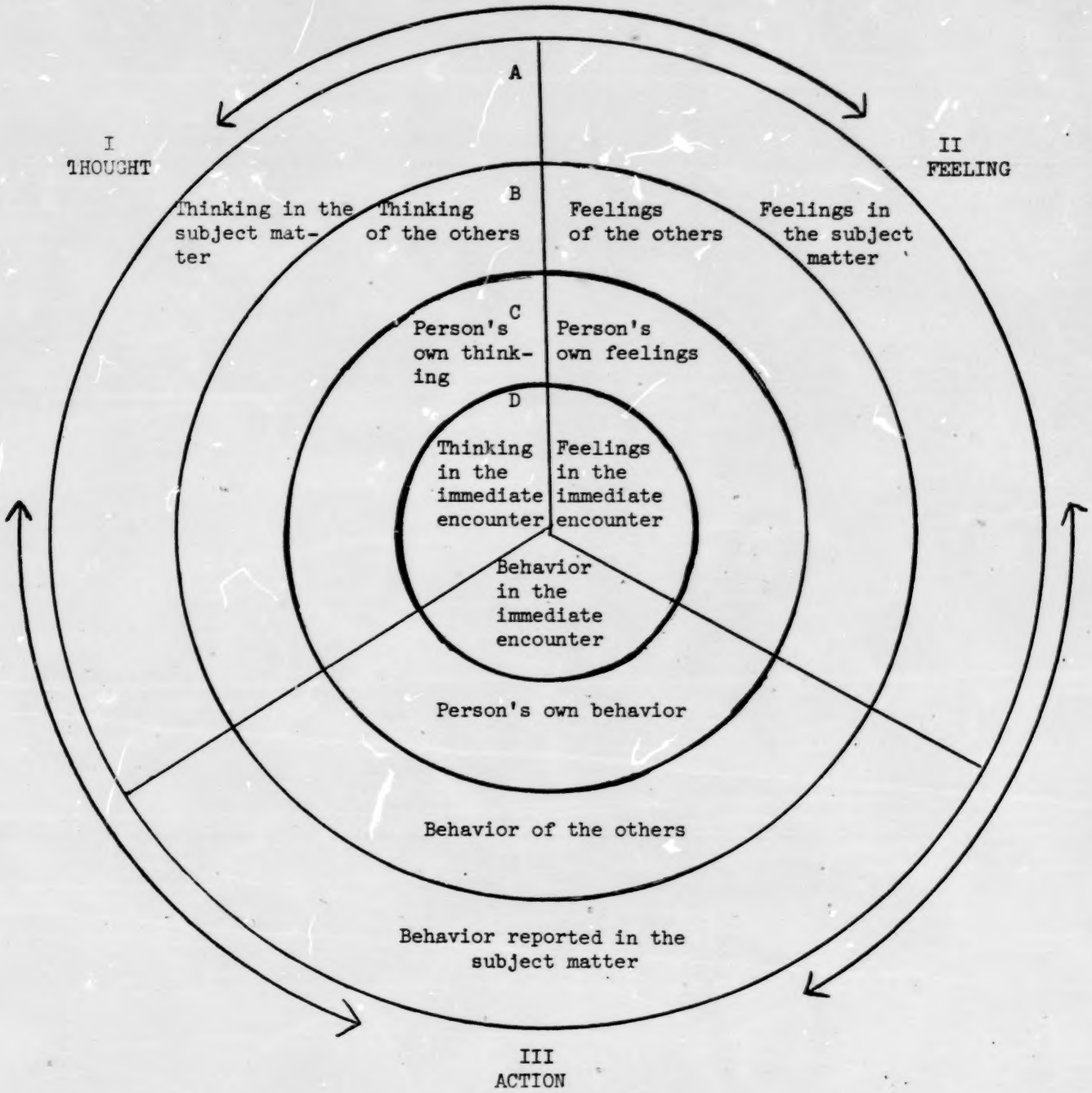
High School Graduate:_____

Completed some college studies:_____

College Graduate:_____

Other:_____

The options for participation available to a person as a member and/or leader of a group. The participation can be in any one or in all twelve of the segments of the circle.



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